

GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS NATIONAL PARK ROADS & BRIDGES,
HEINTOOGA ROUND BOTTOM ROAD & BALSAM MOUNTAIN ROAD
Between Blue Ridge Parkway and Big Cove Road
Gatlinburg Vicinity
Sevier County
Tennessee

HAER NO. TN-35-M

HAER
TENN
78-GAT.V
6M-

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

National Park Service
Department of the Interior
P.O. Box 37127
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Location: Great Smoky Mountains National Park,
North Carolina, between Blue Ridge
Parkway and Big Cove Road

Date of Construction: 1930s-60s

Type of Structure: Roads, Bridges, and Landscapes

Use: National Park Transportation System

Engineer: U.S. Bureau of Public Roads and National
Park Service

Fabricator/Builder: Various private and public contractors

Owner: U.S. Department of the Interior,
National Park Service, Great Smoky
Mountains National Park

Significance: The transportation system of Great Smoky
Mountains National Park is
representative of NPS park road design
and landscape planning throughout the
country. Much of the construction,
including that of the Heintooga Round
Bottom Road and Balsam Mountain Road,
was undertaken by the Civilian
Conservation Corps during the 1930s.
Once established this road system
provided access to the first national
park in the southern portion of the
United States as well as links to the
Blue Ridge Parkway and Shenandoah
National Park.

Project Information: Documentation was conducted during the
summer of 1996 under the co-sponsorship
of HABS/HAER, Great Smoky Mountains
National Park, the National Park Service

Roads and Parkway Program and funded through the Federal Lands Highway Program. Measured drawings were produced by Edward Lupyak, field supervisor, Matthew Regnier, Karen Young, and Dorota Sikora (ICOMOS intern, Poland). The historical reports were prepared by Cornelius Maher and Michael Kelleher. See also drawings and histories on related structures: Great Smoky Mountains National Park, TN-35; Newfound Gap Road, TN-35-A; Clingmans Dome Road, TN-35-B; Little River Road, TN-35-C; Cades Cove and Laurel Creek Roads, TN-35-D; Foothills Parkway, TN-35-E; Cataloochee Valley Road, TN-35-F; Roaring Fork Motor Nature Trail, TN-35-G; Big Creek Road, TN-35-H; Northshore Road, TN-35-I; Cosby Park Road, TN-35-J; Deep Creek Road, TN-35-K; Greenbrier Road, TN-35-L; Cataloochee Trail and Turnpike, TN-35-N; Rich Mountain Road, TN-35-O; Elkmont Road, TN-35-P; Loop Over Bridge, TN-35-Q; Smokemont Bridge, TN-35-R; Elkmont Vehicle Bridge, TN-35-S; and Luten Bridges, TN-35-T.

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Introduction

Heintooga Round Bottom Road, also known as Heintooga Ridge Road, begins as a spur of the Blue Ridge Parkway near the parkway's southern terminus in North Carolina. Turning north from the parkway, the road travels along the top of a ridge leading up toward Balsam Mountain. At 3.6 miles, the Heintooga Ridge Road goes through Black Camp Gap. At this point, the section of the road under the jurisdiction of the Blue Ridge Parkway ends, and Great Smoky Mountains National Park begins. The Balsam Mountain Campground is located on the west side of the road, 4.7 miles from Black Camp Gap.

Heintooga Ridge Road ends 5.2 miles from the park boundary in a traffic circle turn-around. There is a picnic area located here as well as a nearby campground, however, both have been closed by the Park Service due to budgetary constraints. A short distance from the end of the road is the 5,535' Heintooga Overlook, which offers a grand view the areas of the park north and west of this location.

After traveling along the Heintooga Ridge Road to the overlook, motorists can turn-around and take this modern two-lane

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road back to the Blue Ridge Parkway, or continue deeper into Great Smoky Mountains National Park via the Balsam Mountain Road. This primitive dirt road travels one-way only down the side of the mountain ridges to Round Bottom, where the two-way Straight Fork Road leads to the park boundary with the Cherokee reservation, 14 miles from the Heintooga Overlook.

At the beginning of Balsam Mountain Road, the roadway begins to descend along the west side of the long ridge which leads up to Balsam Mountain. The forest grows in close on the sides of the road, which is not much wider than a large trail. At 2.7 miles an overlook provides a view to the west.

The road takes a large turn at 7 miles and goes through a saddle on the ridge to its east side, crossing from the drainage area of Raven Fork to that of Cataloochee Creek which lies east of Balsam Mountain. At 8 miles, the road goes through Pin Oak Gap, which separates Spruce and Balsam mountains, and begins to descend steeply toward the southwest, away from Balsam Mountain and toward Round Bottom.

The Balsam Mountain Road crosses Ledge Creek via a small wood bridge at 11.5 miles, and proceeds along the north bank of

the creek, descending more gradually toward Round Bottom. The foliage is noticeably thicker and more lush in this area than the more sparse foliage found at the higher and drier elevations along the road.

At 13 miles, the one-way Balsam Mountain Road ends at the level area known as Round Bottom. Here, the two-way Straight Fork Road begins by fording Straight Fork and then following the north bank of this creek southwest 4 miles to the park boundary. From this point, Big Cove Road travels through the Cherokee reservation to reenter the park near the Oconaluftee Visitor Center.

Logging Railroads in the Pre-Park Period

Following the opening of its mill at Waynesville, North Carolina in 1925, the Suncrest Lumber Company built a railroad to carry logs from Black Camp Gap, on the present-day southeastern boundary of Great Smoky Mountains National Park, down to Waynesville. By 1929, it had extended the railroad along the ridge of Balsam Mountain, through Polls Gap. During the same period, the Parsons Pulp and Lumber Company built a mill at

Ravensford, North Carolina near the present-day Oconaluftee Visitor Center, and a railroad from the mill up Raven Fork and Straight Fork to Round Bottom. As this area was depleted of trees, the railroad was extended to Balsam Mountain.¹

Constructing Roads for the Park

The Heintooga Ridge-Balsam Mountain area was first considered as a location for a road in Great Smoky Mountains National Park in October 1930, when National Park Service Director Horace Albright visited the soon to be established park. In the company of individuals associated with the movement for the park, Albright traveled on the Suncrest Lumber Company's railroad along Balsam Ridge in order to consider it as a location for a road.²

Following the establishment of the park in 1934, the CCC began the construction of Balsam Mountain-Straight Fork Road over

¹ Lambert, "Logging in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park," 31-32.

² Verne Rhodes, Executive Secretary, North Carolina Park Commission, to W.A. Bradley, Manager, Suncrest Lumber Company, September 6, 1930; North Carolina Park Commission, Box 4; Correspondence-Verne Rhodes, 1928, File 7; GSMNP.

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the now abandoned railroad beds. In May 1936, the enrollees began to build the road from Ravensford, to Round Bottom and Balsam Mountain.³ In July, the CCC was "finishing and surfacing" what was referred to as the "Ledge Creek-Balsam Mountain Motorway." This road ran for 33 miles from Ravensford, north through the Cherokee reservation, into the park to Balsam Mountain, then south to Black Camp Gap.⁴ The work of "[b]lading, ditching and surfacing" the portion of the road from Round Bottom to Black Camp Gap continued in June 1937,⁵ and was completed by 1938, after which the road was used by the Park Service as a truck trail.⁶

In the 1930s and 1940s, the Park Service planned to construct a spur from the nearby Blue Ridge Parkway along Heintooga Ridge to the boundary of Great Smoky Mountains National Park at Black Camp Gap. From there, a park road, Heintooga Ridge Road, was to continue along the route of Balsam Mountain Road to

³ Superintendent's Monthly Report, May 1936; GSMNP.

⁴ Superintendent's Monthly Report, July 1936; GSMNP.

⁵ Superintendent's Monthly Report, June 1937; GSMNP.

⁶ Inventory and Inspection Report, U.S. Bureau of Public Roads; Roads Vertical File; GSMNP Library.

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an overlook at the edge of Heintooga Ridge. The proposed roadway was staked in April 1941,⁷ and a "[r]econnaissance" of the route to the Heintooga Overlook was conducted in May.⁸

Further work on the Heintooga Ridge Road was delayed by World War II. In the meantime, Balsam Mountain Road was opened to park visitors on June 22, 1943, in order to allow motorists to drive from Ravensford up to the Heintooga Overlook.⁹

As the war approached its end in June 1945, Blair Ross, the new superintendent of Great Smoky Mountains National Park, proposed that the park expand its plans for the Heintooga Ridge Road and provide visitor facilities such as a campground and picnic area at the Heintooga Overlook.¹⁰ Plans for the road were altered to include these facilities, but work did not begin until November 1949, when the Heintooga Ridge Road was resurveyed and the Balsam Mountain Campground laid out.¹¹ The Gatlinburg

⁷ Superintendent's Monthly Report, April 1941; GSMNP.

⁸ Superintendent's Monthly Report, May 1941; GSMNP.

⁹ Superintendent's Monthly Report, June 1943; GSMNP.

¹⁰ Superintendent's Monthly Report, June 1945; GSMNP.

¹¹ Superintendent's Monthly Report, November 1949; GSMNP.

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Construction Company began the \$332,000 contract for the road and campground in March 1950.¹² Stone for the project was quarried at the site.¹³ The extension of the Blue Ridge Parkway to the park boundary at Black Camp Gap, where it would join Heintooga Ridge Road, was begun in August 1950.¹⁴

Heintooga Ridge Road was completed on July 31, 1952,¹⁵ and the full 6-mile road from the Blue Ridge Parkway to the Heintooga Overlook and the Balsam Mountain Campground and picnic area was opened on October 4.¹⁶ From here, visitors could return to the parkway, or drive down the Balsam Mountain Road to Round Bottom and on to Oconaluftee. Park Superintendent Edward Hummel reported that visitors were "crazy about the view" from the overlook and were arriving in large numbers. As a result, from the time the Heintooga Ridge Road opened, there were not enough

¹² Superintendent's Monthly Report, May 1950; GSMNP.

¹³ Superintendent's Monthly Report, August 1950; GSMNP.

¹⁴ Superintendent's Monthly Report, August 1950; GSMNP.

¹⁵ Superintendent's Monthly Report, July 1952; GSMNP.

¹⁶ Superintendent's Monthly Report, September 1952; GSMNP.

parking spaces to accommodate visitors in the area.¹⁷ The road was paved between November 1955¹⁸ and July 1956.¹⁹

A 1.3-mile section of the Straight Fork Road was improved in 1962 and 1963 by the Hart Construction Company of Sevierville, Tennessee. The \$64,825 project, which included the construction of one bridge and required the closure of the road, began on June 2.²⁰ The bridge was completed, and traffic was again allowed over the road, in October 1962.²¹ The full project was completed on April 19, 1963.²²

In response to its concerns for the safety of the increasing number of visitors to Great Smoky Mountains National Park in the 1960s, the Park Service converted the primitive Balsam Mountain Road from a two-way to a one-way road on June 15, 1966.²³

¹⁷ Superintendent's Monthly Report, October 1952; GSMNP.

¹⁸ Superintendent's Monthly Report, November 1955; GSMNP.

¹⁹ Superintendent's Monthly Report, July 1956; GSMNP.

²⁰ Superintendent's Monthly Report, May 1962; GSMNP.

²¹ Superintendent's Monthly Report, October 1962; GSMNP.

²² Superintendent's Monthly Report, April 1963; GSMNP.

²³ Superintendent's Monthly Report, June 1966; GSMNP.

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Straight Fork Road from the park boundary to Round Bottom remained a two-way road, however, motorists could travel on the Balsam Mountain Road only from the Heintooga Overlook down to Round Bottom.

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